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ABSTRACT

Printed materials and teacher practice continue to perpetuate rather than challenge harmful stereotypes about women, making it necessary to create teacher education courses to raise the level of consciousness of inservice and preservice teachers. At the University of Florida, a course entitled "The Gender-Free Curriculum" has four purposes: (1) raise the consciousness level of participants on a range of issues; (2) increase understanding of cultural influences whereby stereotypes are conveyed; (3) train participants in content analysis procedures for evaluating materials in and out of the school setting; and (4) enable participants to develop a repertoire of materials and procedures for positive change in their own school. Using "Together We Can: Elementary and Secondary Training Kit" as a source of class activities, students' gender-related feelings and attitudes are identified, and coordinated activities are prescribed. Content analyses are performed of a textbook, a television show, and a noncurricular publication. Completion of the fourth goal allows the participant to translate the attitudes and skills developed from the first three goals into a plan of action. Teacher educators can and should extend their efforts well beyond the limits of the course in order to eliminate sex stereotyping in elementary and secondary classrooms as well as in society at large. (FG)

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BEYOND THE STATUS QUO: MERGING FEMINIST STUDIES WITH TEACHER EDUCATION

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BEYOND THE STATUS QUO: MERGING FEMINIST STUDIES WITH TEACHER EDUCATION

Since the early 1960's, feminist scholars have become increasingly successful in countering the errors found in traditional scholarship's treatment of women. The bias and misogyny which often characterized the representation of women there has been forcefully challenged with the research field, where false assumptions, faulty methodology, and erroneous conclusions were once allowed to reinforce sex-role stereotypes with impugnity. The advent of a substantial body of feminist theory and criticism has provided new avenues of perception, serving as corrective to literally centuries of scholarly abuse. The result in academe has been a narrowing of the gap between the stereotypes and reality for woman, as subject of research, at least.

Unfortunately, while many educators have recognized the urgent need to eliminate the disparity between social realities and the sex-role stereotypes conveyed by many K-12 learning materials and classroom practices, few have succeeded in effecting significant change of those materials and practices. In spite of recent efforts of textbook publishers to eliminate the stereotypes, the materials put into our children's hands continue to be riddled with distortion in their depiction of girls and women. Females are either missing from the text (as is most often the case), or they are presented in limited and demeaning roles. They show up in math word problems as the individuals who fail. They are the victims of brutal humor in language arts exercises. They are the sideline spectators in children's readers. In the library, where one would expect to find a more balanced portrayal of women, they fare no better. It is not surprising that both

sexes tend to prefer their fiction heroes to be male, since female protagonists are seldom presented as adventurous, ingenious, or even capable of handling problems. The "sleeper" of fairy tales is a typical woman protagonist, if indeed, women characters merit the designation protagonist.

It is evident, then, that the destruction of error is not likely to emanate from the printed materials currently in use in the K-12 setting. So the correction of misrepresentations abounding there regarding the potential of girls and women must originate with the classroom teacher. Yet many of these teachers continue to perpetrate rather than challenge the stereotypes conveyed in curricular materials, both by their classroom practices and by their response patterns, which serve as models to their students. They are apparently insufficiently aware of the many negative effects sex-role stereotyping upon the students they teach. Teacher education programs have an obligation to raise this awareness level and to initiate patterns of change that can have far-reaching effects upon K-12 classroom practices. The following description posits a model for teacher training designed to implement such change.

To be effective, any teacher education course must provide experiences which incorporate both theory and practice, while encouraging personal growth in dimensions consonant with that theory. The course developed at the University of North Florida to combat sexism in the classroom--The Gender-Free Curriculum--follows such a plan. Designed to meet the needs of both preservice and in-service students, The Gender-Free Curriculum has a four-fold purpose:

to raise the consciousness level of participants on a spectrum of related issues,

to increase participants' understanding of the cultural influences whereby stereotypes are conveyed,

to train participants in content analysis procedures for evaluating materials and behavior patterns both in and out of the school setting, and

to enable participants to develop a repertoire of materials and procedures designed to effect positive change in their own school settings.

These goals are seen as incremental, and are accomplished by providing participants with a variety of activities, from role playing to library research projects. The W.E.E.A.-developed resource kit, Together We Can,[1] serves as a valuable source for class activities, contributing to the accomplishment of all four goals. Since every experience in the course contributes to enhanced awareness, consciousness raising cannot be seen as a discrete activity, but rather as an effect of the total experience. There is initially, however, the need to address participants' feelings and to acknowledge the diversity which will inevitably exist, with regard to gender-related issues. So the first few sessions are devoted to developing participants' awareness of their relative positions on gender-related issues, and to their acknowledging the disparities that sometimes exist between their professed positions and their actions.

Enhanced awareness of the cultural influences which perpetuate the stereotypes is effected primarily via the reading of selected sources, from St. Jerome to Marilyn French. Students are encouraged to choose readings which address both historical and contemporary issues, to achieve some perspective on the current status of the sexes. Since the typical reaction to this new knowledge is anger followed by depression, the instructor schedules this activity not in isolation, but in conjunction with goals three and four. This coordination of activities allows participants to

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[1] Together We Can: Elementary and Secondary Training Kit. Newton, Mass: Educational Development Center, 1979.

channel their strong reactions to research findings into some constructive endeavor which addresses the concerns raised by the research.

The acquisition of content analysis skills enables participants to conduct empirical research in areas that interest them. The process of identifying categories, conducting a frequency count, and making inferences from the results of that tabulation is relatively easy to learn. Using forms included in Together We Can, students are required to analyze a textbook, a television show, and one non-curricular publication, such as a newspaper or magazine. They must then conduct a content analysis of some selection of their own choosing, using the skills acquired in these limited analyses. Their efforts have ranged from a survey of greeting cards to an investigation of library acquisitions during a six-month period.

Goals one through three will, if nothing else, change the tenor of the participants' faculty lounge conversations. Goal four allows this new knowledge about self and others to be translated into a plan for action. The participant may see the sharing with colleagues of bias-free methods and materials as the most promising action she could take. She may choose to emphasize women's history with her students and with colleagues. She may develop strategies for dealing with stereotypic materials, where no substitute for these materials is available. She may recognize her most important role to be as an advocate of change, challenging her colleagues who classify girls as "good readers" and boys as "deep thinkers," for example. Or she may combine several strategies and pursue change on an even grander scale.

Whatever course of action participants choose to develop, they have acquired knowledge and skills in the course which should enable them to proceed intelligently. The instructior's role as support person to those

plans will extend well beyond the limits of the course. Follow-up activities may include the presentation, on demand, of workshops to individual school faculties on various aspects of the gender-free curriculum, the offering of lectures and demonstrations at professional gatherings, including district-wide professional development days, the incorporation of elements of this curriculum into intern seminars and other pre-service course offerings, and the presentation of related professional development seminars to one's own colleagues.

While budgetary constraints will continue to frustrate those who see the elimination of sex-stereotyping as one of the most important goals of teacher education programs today, the university instructor who is ingenious and indefatigable can find ways to implement this goal. The investment in such a program is sometimes made at the expense of other interests, such as meeting administrative expectations for merit consideration. One must weigh this concern against the long-term benefits to be realized by the education of teacher-activists in the cause. And one should work for recognition of the legitimacy of teacher education programs dealing with eliminating sexism, where no such acknowledgment exists. Finally, one should perceive efforts at eradicating sexism in the K-12 setting as prerequisite to the eradication of sexism in the culture at large. In a very real sense, teachers are the key to correcting what is wrong within the system. Teacher educators play a less direct, but no less vital roles in that process. Their willingness to assume an active part in the elimination of sexism in the classroom will be one important determining factor in the future status of women. They will do well to heed their responsibility to both sexes to help insure equitable treatment in classroom practices and learning materials for the K-12 student.